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What do families really need?

The challenge of work-family balance

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In the last twenty years, throughout Europe, political, business and social initiatives have been implemented aimed at 'resolving' the work and family life reconciliation problem. However, instead of achieving a satisfactory solution, the same concerns and complaints persist, or have even increased. Instead of finding appropriate solutions, we seem to have found new and even more complex problems, contradictions and paradoxes. These problems arise as policies which aim to help people are implemented; however, the current demands of the labor market seem to be going in the opposite direction to the needs of the family life.

In reality, the work-family reconciliation issue is multi-faceted; it's not just about family and work. And it actually seems to be growing, as what started out as a problem specifically related to the work environment these days includes cultural, educational and economic elements, among others. Its appearance changes depending on how you look at it, on the strategies which are implemented to resolve it, and on the overall objectives of these strategies.

Work and family reconciliation as a problem for families

From the point of view of families, the work and family reconciliation problem mainly seems to be a question of time, of stress, and of perceived or real incompatibility between work demands and the needs of our family life.¹ The most frequently mentioned problems and difficulties are: 1) lack of time to care for and educate children; 2) lack of time to look after seniors and other dependents; 3) lack of time to carry out household tasks; 4) increased stress due to the difficulty of carrying out these tasks; 5) increased tension and conflict within the family due to accumulated stress; and 6) more cases of physical and mental illness due to these difficult and stressful situations.

In the competitive society we currently live in, families are clearly having problems balancing the demands of their work environments with their own expectations for their personal lives.² These difficulties become even more extreme in certain circumstances. Ten million people in Spain³ had at least one child under 14, and, of these, one and a half million used childcare services to help look after them (daycare centers, play centers and other extracurricular activities). In the same year, almost 850,000 people didn't work, and gave up looking for work in order to take care of their children. Sixty per cent of these people made this decision because childcare services were 'very expensive'. Another 300,000 people didn't work or look for work –or did so part-time– in order to look after other dependents on a regular basis. Ninety-five per cent of the people who reduced their work commitments in order to take care of family obligations were women. In Spain, also according to the NIS, in 2010, 2,670,000 people between the ages of 16 and 64 looked after dependent seniors on a regular basis. Of these, 1,440,000 also

¹ OECD, 'Babies and Bosses. Reconciling work and family life. A synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries' (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris 2007). A. López y A. Acereda, 'Entre la familia y el trabajo. Realidades y soluciones para la sociedad actual' (Narcea, Madrid 2007). C. Tobío, 'Madres que trabajan. Dilemas y estrategias' (Cátedra, Madrid 2005).

² INE, 'Encuesta de Empleo del Tiempo 2009-2011'. Available at www.ine.es (2011). Consejería de Empleo y Mujer de La Comunidad de Madrid, 'Encuesta sobre conciliación de la vida laboral y personal de la población de la Comunidad de Madrid: informe de resultados' (TNS Demoscopia, Madrid 2005).

³ INE, 'Encuesta de Población Activa (EPA). Módulo sobre conciliación entre la vida laboral y la familiar'. Available at www.ine.es (2010).

worked outside the home. The need for reconciliation is clear, as are the difficulties: 27.5% of wage earners reported not having been able to modify their work schedule for family reasons, and 31.5% say that they were not able to adjust their work day in order to take time off for family reasons.

Work and family reconciliation as a problem for companies

From the point of view of companies, work and family reconciliation is also an important problem.⁴ For companies, the demands of work-life reconciliation appear in different forms; the main one being the high level of absenteeism due to family issues. Also frequently mentioned is low productivity due to family matters (which include looking after children and other dependents, but also the need to take care of other unexpected issues which arise, problems with education or with health, tension and stress, and even separation or divorce). From an organizational perspective, these issues can involve having to find substitutes for people on maternity or paternity leave, and for people who are on leave either for a short or long period of time due to other family matters, such as the unexpected illness of a small child, or other household issues which may arise.

For companies, work and family reconciliation appears mainly to be a problem in terms of the performance and organization of people who have to take care of non-work-related issues. However, there are other aspects involved.⁵ If a company wants to attract and retain particularly qualified or skilled workers, it must find ways to allow these employees to balance their home and work commitments.⁶ However, whilst this might satisfy some workers, the company will probably then have to manage the likely discontent of other workers who are not benefitting from such measures, and who may even end up having to do some of the work of their colleagues who are. An additional challenge is that of managing possible flexibility measures in the context of collective bargaining of labor conditions in order to achieve equal conditions for all workers.⁷

Work and family reconciliation as a political problem

Public institutions also see work and family reconciliation as a problem, but one with different dimensions and different priorities. Governments are increasingly aware of the need to deal with matters in this area which go beyond the capacity (and possibly the interest) of companies and/or the families themselves⁸, and which end up forming part of the social welfare system.⁹

On the one hand, the low birth rate is a cause for concern. This rate has, for quite a long time, been below the generational replacement level.¹⁰ As we all know, studies repeatedly show that families would like to have more children than they actually have. However, labor market conditions impede it. From the point of view of the government, the low birth rate is of particular concern due to the consequent ageing of the population, and the increase in health and social security expenses that this involves, along with concerns regarding the sustainability of the pensions system.

On the other hand, public institutions want to ensure that dependents (children, seniors and disabled people) are looked after. They understand that this problem goes beyond families' current capacities, particularly in the case of 'dual-earner families', who dedicate a lot of time to their work and less time to family relationships. This also raises concerns for politicians regarding other matters, such as school drop-out rates, which are often due to families paying less attention to the educational needs of their children and teenagers. As public institutions have started to pay increasing attention to these social demands and concerns, the work and family reconciliation problem has ended up becoming a political problem too.

Work and family reconciliation as a cultural problem

⁴ N. Chinchilla, 'Ser una empresa familiarmente responsable. ¿Lujo o necesidad?' (Pearson, Prentice Hall, Madrid 2007).

⁵ EBTP-European Business Test Panel, 'The importance of family-friendliness for business development'. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/ebtp/consultations/family/report_en.pdf (2009). Fecha de consulta 11.9.2012.

⁶ R. Albert, L. Escot, J.A. Fernández, y M.T. Palomo, 'Las políticas de conciliación de la vida familiar y laboral desde la perspectiva del empleador. Problemas y ventajas para la empresa, en Cuaderno de Trabajo 02/2010 de la E.U' (Estadística, Universidad Complutense de Madrid 2010).

⁷ J. Montoya i Barberá, 'Papel de la acción sindical y la negociación colectiva en las políticas de conciliación' (2007), en A. López y A. Acereda, 'Entre la familia y el trabajo. Realidades y soluciones para la sociedad actual' (Narcea, Madrid).

⁸ M.B. Cardona, 'Medidas de conciliación de la vida personal, laboral y familiar. Hacia un respeto igualitario de las reformas parentales' (Bor-marzo, Albacete 2009). C. Hein, 'Conciliar el trabajo y las responsabilidades familiares. Ideas prácticas de la experiencia global' (Informes OIT, Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, Madrid 2006).

⁹ I. Campillo, 'Políticas de conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar en los regímenes de bienestar mediterráneos: los casos de Italia y España', (Política y Sociedad, 2010, 47(1): 189-213). P. Donati, 'Famiglie e bisogni sociali: la frontiera delle buone prassi' (FrancoAngeli, Milano 2007).

¹⁰ EUROFOUND (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), 'Family Life and Work. Second European Quality of Life Survey' (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2010).

The question of work and family reconciliation also contains and reflects a cultural problem.¹¹ The way in which this issue is interpreted and dealt with is closely related to the way in which equality and co-responsibility in family relationships are understood, particularly in terms of household chores and family obligations.

It has frequently been highlighted that we are in a period of transition between the traditional male bread-winner model and a dual-earner family model. In theory, the second model has replaced the previous one; however, in practice, statistics indicate the opposite. Specifically, data on how time is spent within the home and time spent on household chores indicate a big difference between men and women.¹² As I mentioned before, women also play a much bigger role in caring for children and other dependents. For these reasons, women are more likely than men to work part-time and are more likely to bear the brunt of work and family reconciliation, to the extent that it has even been called a 'feminine issue'. This is the situation which, from a cultural perspective, is being denounced as an anachronism that needs to be corrected.¹³ The term 'co-responsibility' is starting to gain popularity as a name for a more equal model of work and family task distribution between men and women; however, this term continues to be disputed by feminist groups, who prefer to emphasize the autonomy of women over interdependence, even on equal terms.

From this perspective, it is clear that the work and family reconciliation problem has arisen from the fact that over the last few decades women have joined the labor market, but have continued to also be responsible for family obligations. This means that they often feel obliged to take lower-category jobs, with lower salaries and fewer career opportunities. And this is why the differences between men and women in the work environment continue to exist. It seems as though society accepts the fact that women will give up opportunities for professional advancement in order to take care of family obligations; however, the same is not expected of men, neither in companies nor in the family home.¹⁴ The decisions which are made in many companies and in many families on this matter seem to perpetuate this model of distributing family tasks and possibilities for professional development.

Work and family reconciliation strategies in families

In Spain, for many families, achieving work and family life balance still means finding private means to do so, and this often means making frequent adjustments depending on the changing needs of work and family environments.¹⁵ These 'private means' mainly include: delaying having children; having fewer children; making use of other members of the family, particularly grandparents, for childcare arrangements; and reducing work hours, which also implies a reduction of salary and of opportunities for professional and career development.

In general, the burden of these 'strategies' falls mainly on women. As many different studies have shown, the main things which help working mothers achieve work and family life balance are the following, in this order: 1) support from their own mother, their husband or from other members of the family; 2) living close to their work or to their children's school; 3) paid help within the home; and 4) services offered by their children's schools.¹⁶ According to data from the NIS, in 2010, in Spain, almost 700,000 people reduced their working day in order to look after a child under eight years old. Of these, 85% were women and 15% were men. Another 260,000 people took a full-time leave of absence to look after a child under eight years old, 93% of whom were women. Almost half the people who request these leaves of absence don't go back to paid work afterwards.

Comments by women about working part-time are often contradictory.¹⁷ On the one hand, there are lots of women who think that it is a good option while their children are young, and who even claim that they work more hours than they would like to. However, on the other hand, they also show a certain mistrust of part-time work, believing it to be less secure, more badly paid and generally having worse conditions than full-time work.

Male participation in 'family strategies' has increased in recent years, but is still very low in comparative terms. Despite the fact that the co-responsibility model is starting to gain acceptance in our collective mentality, the general expectations of the work environment and the inertia of the existing household chore distribution model are slowing down the development of new family models.

¹¹ T. Torns, 'Conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar o corresponsabilidad: ¿el mismo discurso?' (Observatori per a la igualtat UAB, RIDEG, 1, 5-13, 2011).

¹² INE, 'Encuesta de Empleo del Tiempo 2009-2011'. Available at www.ine.es (2011). EUROSTAT, 'Gender gaps in the reconciliation between work and family life', (Statistics in focus, Populations and Social Conditions, 2005, 4).

¹³ C. Tobío, 'Madres que trabajan. Dilemas y estrategias' (Cátedra, Madrid 2005).

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ M. Crespo y F. Moretón, 'Conciliación de trabajo y familia. Las claves del éxito: eficiencia empresarial e implicación masculina' (Colex, Madrid 2010). V. Borrás, T. Torns, S. Morena, 'Las políticas de conciliación: políticas laborales versus políticas de tiempo' (Papers, 83: 83-96, 2007).

¹⁶ ECFE, 'Estudio sobre la conciliación de la vida familiar y la vida laboral: situación actual, necesidades y demandas, Observatorio para la Igualdad de Oportunidades entre mujeres y hombres' (Instituto de la Mujer, Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, Madrid 2005).

¹⁷ J.A. Fernández y C. Tobío, 'Conciliar las políticas familiares y laborales: políticas y prácticas sociales', (Documento de trabajo 79/2005, Fundación Alternativas, 2005).

Work and family reconciliation strategies in companies

The number of public and private companies which have introduced work and family reconciliation measures for employees has been continuously increasing in recent years. On the one hand, this is because they have been obliged to due to changes in legislation. On the other hand, they are also slowly responding to the fact that society is increasingly in favor of reconciliation, and also to the fact that, as studies are starting to show, if they are set up correctly, work and family reconciliation policies don't just not have a negative effect on productivity, but may in fact have a positive effect.¹⁸

The measures which companies most commonly adopt are those which have the following points as their main objectives:¹⁹ making working hours more flexible by adapting schedules, calendars and shifts to personal circumstances; making the place of work more flexible, using measures such as telework, video conferences and other technologies; leave adapted to the specific needs of employees; childcare services and daycare centers, etc; and different kinds of additional benefits, such as subsidies for having a child, insurance, etc. In some sectors –due to the nature of the activity, the organization of shifts, or other reasons– it can be difficult for companies to adopt these kind of measures. Additionally, small and medium-sized companies often don't have enough economic and/or organizational resources to implement the same sort of work and family reconciliation measures which can be seen in large companies²⁰. This means that work and family reconciliation measures need to be developed and managed taking into account the specific business context of each company.

In any case, from a business perspective, work and family reconciliation measures can be presented as ways of flexibilizing and innovating human resource policies, which can help companies to retain top talent, as well as other benefits for the company, such as promoting their corporate image, improving the working climate, reducing absenteeism, and, as a result of all this, increasing productivity.

Political work and family reconciliation strategies

Up until the middle of the 1990's, the European Union focused on work and family reconciliation from the perspective of equal opportunities for men and women. However, since then, they have been focusing on it from an employment policies perspective.²¹ The objective of the European Employment Strategies arising from the Lisbon Treaty was to increase female employment. Since then, several different work and family reconciliation policies have been implemented, based on two main areas: care services for daily life and leaves of absence to care for young children and other dependents. In Spain, the Law on Reconciliation of Work and Family life for Working People (Law 39/1999) added European directives on maternity and paternity leave and part-time work to Spanish legislation. Since then, a number of legislative measures have, directly or indirectly, dealt with different aspects of work and family reconciliation, particularly the Law for Promotion of Personal Autonomy and Care of Dependent Persons (Law 39/2006) and the Law for Effective Equality between Men and Women (Law 3/2007).

The main aim of all these political policies on work and family reconciliation is to stimulate the inclusion of women in the labor market with equal conditions to men. It is expected that, in the near future, no European country will have a feminine employment rate below 60%. The justifications for this goal are mainly based on macroeconomic data. According to the European Commission, 'work and family reconciliation policies are the key response to economic and demographic challenges in the long-term, and must be demanded as a means of stimulating growth'.²² The political argument for work-life reconciliation is a functional perspective, in which the demands of the economic system take priority. As Torns criticizes, political interest in the work and family reconciliation issue has been focused on increasing availability to work in the active population, particularly for women, prioritizing the competitive needs of the economic system over the needs of the population.

Cultural work and family reconciliation strategies

Public policies obviously have a cultural dimension in that they promote a particular model of society. This means that, in practice, work and family reconciliation policies are becoming a forum for dispute and confrontation, not only regarding different political perspectives, but also regarding alternative models of social and cultural coexistence.

In this context, promoting work and family reconciliation measures means taking part in an ideological confrontation about the proven or foreseen consequences of values such as co-responsibility and equality between men and women. The political parties and many different civil society organizations and actors are aware of the fact that work and family reconciliation policies promote specific cultural interests and values. In this context, it is clear that the objective of EU policies is to create a soci-

¹⁸ IFREI, 'Análisis sectorial de las políticas de conciliación' (Centro Internacional Trabajo y Familia IESE, Barcelona 2006). Available at <http://www.iese.edu/research/pdfs/ESTUDIO-41.pdf>. Fecha de consulta 11.5.2012. J.R. Mercader, 'Productividad y conciliación en la vida laboral y personal. Análisis de situación y propuestas para el futuro' (Fundación Telefónica, Madrid 2008).

¹⁹ G. Meil, C. García, M.Á. Luque y L. Ayuso, 'El desafío de la conciliación de la vida privada y laboral en las grandes empresas' (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2010).

²⁰ N. Chinchilla, 'Ser una empresa familiarmente responsable. ¿Lujo o necesidad?' (Pearson, Prentice Hall, Madrid 2007).

²¹ EUROFOUND (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), 'Family Life and Work. Second European Quality of Life Survey' (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2010).

²² *Ibidem*: 6.

ety of 'dual-earners', with support in the form of care services provided by the State. This is an objective which promotes and reinforces a coexistence model in which men and women work full-time and the care of young children and other dependents is provided through social organizations (social care).

According to different ideological affiliations, these care services can be organized according to market criteria (the liberal perspective), as public service provisions (the socialist perspective), or through an economically and politically reasonable and sustainable combination of both. The dependence on an ideological model is more explicit in some authors and concepts, such as those for whom²³ the objective of work-life reconciliation policies should be the 'demarketization' and 'defamiliarization' of the welfare system, meaning that it is the public authorities who promote and guarantee a family coexistence model based on personal autonomy in equal terms. In this proposal, 'demarketization' means that the State should guarantee access to care services regardless of economic status; in other words, everyone should have access to the welfare system whether they have a paid job or not. Similarly, 'defamiliarization' means that access to care services is not dependent on one's family situation. In other words, individuals are autonomous from their family members when it comes to accessing care services; these being guaranteed by the State in equal terms for autonomous individuals.

An obvious risk of this is that the ideology is imposed on reality and the State ends up substituting the families whom they say they want to help. This means that it is very important for the State to respect principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. In other words, on the one hand, the State must give more assistance to families who need the most help. On the other hand, the State must not take on the tasks and responsibilities of the family, and must not impose their own criteria on matters which each family must decide for themselves.

Please allow me here to give you a quick summary of the points we've looked at so far. Different social, economic, cultural and political entities and interests play a role in defining work and family reconciliation strategies. The risk is that each group pursues only its own interests: that companies only pursue profit, that the State and the politicians only care about macroeconomic equilibrium or the implementation of a cultural coexistence model, and that all this is at the expense of the quality of life of the families themselves, who are the most vulnerable group of all, and who are being increasingly controlled by constraints which are very different to their own way of being.

So, how can we balance these different perspectives? Any reasonable answer means thinking about what seems to me to be the key question for this whole situation: What do families really need? How can they be helped? How they want to be helped? Work-family balance policies should start by figuring out which are, in fact, the specific needs and demands of today's families. With this point of reference, enterprise, cultural and political solutions can achieve a better balance between the functional requirements they are subject to and the necessary contribution to a sustainable society.

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²³ I. Campillo, 'Políticas de conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar en los regímenes de bienestar mediterráneos: los casos de Italia y España' (Política y Sociedad, 47(1): 189–213, 2010). G. Esping-Andersen, 'Fundamentos sociales de las economías post-industriales' (Ariel, Barcelona 2000).